

# THE VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

*Personalizing the Past*

Story by Heike Hasenauer



**J**UST as every war has its top generals, its celebrated heroes, renowned landmarks and major battles, it has its countless individual stories of survival, valor, even humor. Those stories reveal the intimate feelings that separate one person's experiences from another's.

Realizing the significance of those personal stories, and knowing that many of the stories are lost as thousands of veterans die each year, President George W. Bush signed legislation in October 2000 authorizing the Veterans History Project.

Now those individual stories — which pull heartstrings, evoke pride in country and military service, and introduce “ordinary” people who were swept by the tides of their times and lived as best they could — will live for generations to come, said Ellen McCulloch-Lovell, who directs the project for the Library of Congress's American Folklife Center in Washington, D.C.

The project will preserve the stories of war veterans, service members who supported the war from the home front and the civilian war-industry workers — without whose invaluable service America's efforts to protect freedom around the world would not have been possible, she said.

The national, ongoing effort to preserve their stories

will result in a valuable resource to teach all Americans, including those of future generations, about the rich legacy of military service, said Kelley Curtin, a spokeswoman for Fleishman-Hillard, the advertising company that's working to raise awareness of the project.

The company is among some 250 project partners, including veterans' service organizations, historical societies, libraries, museums, military archives, colleges and universities, and military historical groups, Curtin said.

The American Association of Retired Persons is encouraging its 35 million members to contact veterans whose stories have yet to be recorded, said AARP president Jim Parkel.

“We're creating a well-trained volunteer force to conduct oral-history interviews. And we're continuing to create public programs across the country that will allow veterans, and those who served them, to share their personal experiences,” Parkel added.

These volunteers will conduct audio and video interviews, and collect letters, diaries, photos and other documents, from both civilian and military veterans of World War I, World War II and the Korean, Vietnam and Persian Gulf wars, said McCulloch-Lovell.



*"After 365 days in Vietnam, I went from war to peace, from childhood to irrevocable adulthood. I had changed, but, I thought, I'd never be able to explain it to anybody."*



Janis Nark

**I**ndividuals such as Janis Nark, a motivational speaker and retired Army officer, are also contributing to the project by encouraging veterans to come forward.

Nark was a registered nurse at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, and served 23 years in the Army Reserve. She was recalled to active duty for nine months during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

"In Vietnam I cared for the sick and wounded, and those that would die," Nark said. "We treated everything you can imagine, and lots of things that would never occur to a 'normal' person. We

**Janis Nark served at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, and was recalled to active duty during the Gulf War.**

worked 12-hour shifts, six days a week. I was there late in the conflict, and it was obvious there was no winning that war. Morale was abysmally low and drug use predictably high. Towards the end of my tour, the hospital where I worked was turned into the Drug Detoxification Center of Vietnam.

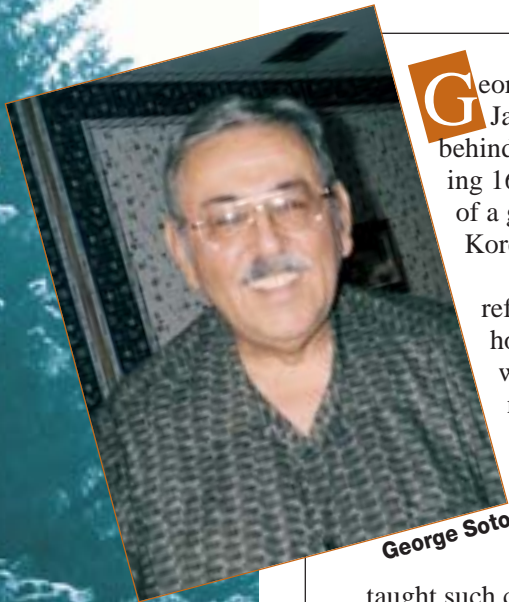
"We detoxed around 500 heroin-addicted soldiers a week," Nark said, as she remembered enduring threats to her life because she held the keys to the narcotics cabinet and refused to let them out of her sight.

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**Participants in the Vietnam War are among those being urged to share their military experiences as part of the ongoing Veterans History Project.**





George Soto

**G**eorge Soto, an Army corporal from January 1952 to January 1954, stayed behind at Camp Chaffee, Ark., after completing 16 weeks of infantry basic training. Out of a graduating class of 28, 27 got orders for Korea.

“I was like a displaced person,” Soto reflected. “I remember going to the hospital one day with a buddy of mine whose wife had just had their baby. The next morning, he was on his way to Korea, and I, ironically, who was single, with no attachments, remained at the camp as part of the 5th Armored Division.”

An instructor of military subjects, Soto taught such common soldier skills as map- and compass-reading to inductees. It’s not the exciting stuff most authors write about in their depictions of war, Soto said. “But, I want people to know that there were others who were important to the war effort because they did stay home to teach the soldiers who went to the front lines.”

His story, as written by a professor at Rutgers University in New York for one of the Spanish-language newspapers in Queens, will be incorporated into the Veterans History Project. It touches on Soto’s life during the 1950s.

“As a New Yorker, a Northerner, who was born in Spanish Harlem, I experienced a great deal of racial inequality,” Soto said. Because he’s Hispanic and was often mistaken for a member of other ethnic groups, he was able to empathize with blacks, who were discriminated against in those years before the civil rights movement gradually righted some of America’s wrongs, he said.

“I remember sitting in the waiting room at a bus station, and a constable told me I was in the wrong place. He told me I shouldn’t be sitting with the ‘coloreds,’” Soto said. “I thought: ‘These are the



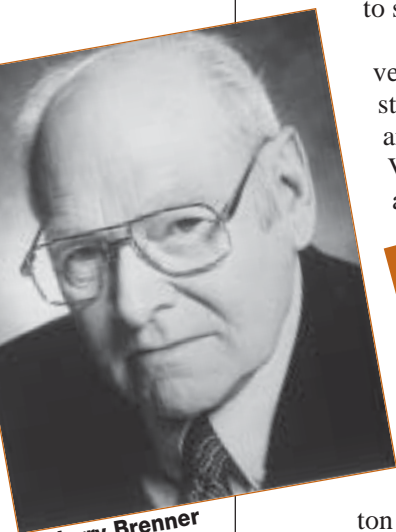
**George Soto posed for this photo outside a 5th Armored Division classroom.**



men who are waiting to go to war, they should certainly be afforded the respect due all soldiers.”

Soto attended the New York kick-off event for the Veterans History Project because he’s actively involved with AARP in his home state, he said. “I bring AARP’s programs to elderly Hispanics, many of whom don’t speak English.” At the same time, Soto has asked them to share their stories.

At the time of this writing, some 1,000 veterans had contacted AARP to tell their stories, Parkel said. And eight short video clips and one audio clip were available at the Veterans History Project’s Internet site, according to McCulloch-Lovell.



Jerry Brenner

**A**mong the developing archives are 1,261 letters exchanged between Jerry Brenner and his wife during World War II.

Brenner was a radio operator and repairman in the 740th Field Artillery Battalion.

After seeing an article about the Veterans History Project in the Washington Post a year ago, he called the information number provided to see if anyone would be interested in the letters.

“They were thrilled to get them,” Brenner said, “because letters that are part of historical collections typically don’t include the replies.”

The letters are now part of an exhibit “that will be available to the public between now and forever,” said Brenner, who wrote a forward to the volume of letters, to indicate that they “show World War II from the perspective of a G.I. fighting in Europe, as well as a young wife and mother on the home front.

“Most histories of war are about big battles, admirals and generals and landmark events,” Brenner said. “They rarely highlight the experiences of ordinary people.”

Included in the correspondence is a letter to his wife, which still contains the flower Brenner was given by a little French boy in one of many towns the Americans



**Brenner sent this cheerful photo to his wife in one of the many letters the pair exchanged during the war.**



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**Brenner's wife and young daughter were among thousands of loved ones who daily awaited news from the front lines.**

liberated from the Germans.

Many of the letters are his wife's updates on their daughter's growth, said Brenner, who was 24 in December 1943, when he left New York for England, and, ultimately, the Battle of the Bulge. His daughter was three months old.

“The letters are full of information about the conditions people on the home front had to contend with, and about the feelings of people very much in love,” Brenner said. U.S. News and World Report reprinted one

of the letters in its June 10, 2002, issue. It's a letter his wife wrote on pink stationery that contained little lip imprints.

“My wife thought the lips were too small, so she redid them with her own lips,” Brenner said. On another occasion, because she'd heard that all the guys carried pinups of beautiful women in bathing suits, she had a seductive photo of herself taken in a bathing suit and enclosed it in a letter.

There was also something called the “blue letter,” Brenner said. It was a very personal letter that a soldier didn't want his immediate commanding officer to read, as was the typical procedure to censor soldiers' mail to prevent breaches of security. “If you put your letter in a blue envelope, it went instead to corps headquarters, where some lieutenant you didn't know read it.”

Brenner wrote such a letter on May 7, 1945, the day the war in Europe ended. “There's some really personal stuff in that letter,” Brenner said. “I poured my heart out in that one.”

McCulloch-Lovell said some of the material that will become part of the Veterans History Project will be reviewed for historical accuracy, but it would be impossible to review everything. “Most people will



**Brenner and hundreds of thousands of other soldiers sent photos home to reassure their loved ones.**



be as accurate as they can be, and those who access the material will be doing so with the knowledge that these are individuals' accounts of their own experiences."

As the world's largest library, and the national library of the United States, the Library of Congress's mission is to make its holdings available to Congress and the American people, and preserve knowledge for future generations, said Librarian of Congress James H. Billington.

The American Folklife Center was created in 1976 to document, preserve and present all aspects of traditional culture and life in America. It currently boasts some two million items.

There's no cut-off date for submissions to the Veterans History Project, McCulloch-Lovell said. "We're just now beginning to really get the word out." □

### *Share Your Stories of WWI, WWII . . .*

and the Korean, Vietnam and Persian Gulf wars, or record the stories of others, by calling toll free (800) 315-8300 or visiting the project's Web site at

***www.loc.gov/vets***

Information is also available at AARP's Web site, ***www.aarp.org***, and at project partner and MilitaryLifestyle at ***www.militarylifestyle.com***.

